Anthropology of Ontologies

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Keywords

ontology, anthropological theory, Anthropocene, multinaturalism

Abstract

The turn to ontology, often associated with the recent works of Philippe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and Bruno Latour, but evident in many other places as well, is, in Elizabeth Povinelli's formulation, "symptomatic" and "diagnostic" of something. It is, I here argue, a response to the sense that sociocultural anthropology, founded in the footsteps of a broad humanist "linguistic" turn, a field that takes social construction as the special kind of human reality that frames its inquiries, is not fully capable of grappling with the kinds of problems that are confronting us in the so-called Anthropocene—an epoch in which human and nonhuman kinds and futures have become so increasingly entangled that ethical and political problems can no longer be treated as exclusively human problems. Attending to these issues requires new conceptual tools, something that a nonreductionistic, ethnographically inspired, ontological anthropology may be in a privileged position to provide.

While philosophy as a field was totally dependent on the concept of modernity, it appeared to me that anthropology could be an entry into the contemporary: precisely because it took ontology seriously at last. Not as symbolic representation. Not as those beliefs left on the wrong side of the modernizing frontier. But as a life and death struggle to have the right to stand in one's own time and place.

–Bruno Latour (2014b), "Anthropology at the time of the Anthropocene"

INTRODUCTION

I here discuss the turn to ontology in sociocultural anthropology. This turn, narrowly defined, is closely tied to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's "multinaturalism" and a series of conversations around his work. In the context of North American anthropology, this turn is sometimes thought of as a "French" turn (Kelly 2014), which would, in addition, involve the recent works of Philippe Descola and Bruno Latour, whose separate and original ontological projects are in close dialogue with Viveiros de Castro's. It is also sometimes thought of as a "European" turn, which would involve the ways in which Viveiros de Castro's work has been taken up in and around Cambridge, and elsewhere, especially in relation to the work of Marilyn Strathern (1988, 1991, 1995) and Roy Wagner (1981) (see especially Henare et al. 2007; Holbraad & Pedersen 2009; Holbraad 2012, 2013a,b; Holbraad et al. 2014; see also Jiménez & Willerslev 2007, Alberti & Bray 2009, Pedersen 2011, Jensen 2013, Paleček & Risjord 2013, M. Scott 2013, Morita 2014). However, this movement is part of a broader turn to ontology in anthropology that cannot be circumscribed by any single intellectual or social context. If the narrow turn, as I explain, cannot be so easily identified as a coherent movement, then the broader turn is even more difficult to identify as such.

Nonetheless, the various ontological anthropologies share something important. They are responses to certain conceptual problems and contradictions that arise as anthropological thought faces new challenges. They are, in Elizabeth Povinelli's (2015) words, both "symptomatic" and "diagnostic" of some sort of broader shift; they are reactions, at times explicit, to the specter of a global ecological crisis. With all its political valences, all its attendant imaginaries, and all the ways in which it is changing our understanding of the relations humans have to that which is other than human, this crisis is "ecologizing" (Latour 2013) how we think about politics in many fields ranging from history (Chakrabarty 2009, 2012, 2014) to political theory (Connolly 2013) to literature (Morton 2013). It is also forcing us to recognize that, despite all its insights, anthropology as a humanistic science lacks some of the conceptual tools needed to face these problems. Thus, I believe the turn to ontology in anthropology is a response to this broader problem. I here seek to trace some of the contours of a general ethnographically inspired ontological anthropology, both in its narrow and broad iterations, arguing that such an approach is uniquely poised to develop conceptual tools that can be part of an ethical practice that must also include and be transformed by our relation to the nonhuman (Kohn 2014).

For the purposes of this article, I define "ontology" as the study of "reality"—one that encompasses but is not limited to humanly constructed worlds. Alternatively, the word "ontology" may be reserved for the study of "Being" in the Heideggerian sense, whereas "ontic" may be used for "reality." Ontology could also be considered in terms of "becoming" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987) or, as some do, in terms of the variable sets of historically contingent assumptions through which humans apprehend reality—a position that can make ontology nearly synonymous with culture (see Venkatesan et al. 2010).

An important related word is "metaphysics," which I define as the systemic attention to or the development of more or less consistent and identifiable styles or forms of thought that change our ideas about the nature of reality. Metaphysics is thus concerned with concepts. Crucially,

a metaphysics is not necessarily an epistemology. That is, it is not necessarily concerned with knowledge and its objects. There are variants of the turn to ontology that are metaphysical but not ontological, as I have defined the term (e.g., Skafish 2011, Holbraad 2012, Viveiros de Castro 2014). Accordingly, these approaches systematically explore forms of thought without necessarily making claims about reality—forms of thought that also demonstrate that any reality claim is either distinct to one metaphysical framework, often associated with the West, or the product of a clash of metaphysical frameworks. Though reality is a term these metaphysically oriented ontological anthropologists tend to avoid, if there is one here, it is inherently relational, comparative, or recursive (Holbraad 2012, 2013a).

There are also ontological forms of anthropology that are not metaphysical. That is, they explore modes of being "made over" by realities not fully circumscribed by human worlds. They cultivate representational crafts that can amplify such transformations—holding, perhaps, that any systemic conceptual account of these modes would "deflect" (Diamond 2008) our attention away from the actual possibility of being made over. One could call this approach an ontological poetics. It involves cultivating representational forms (poetics) that can tap into some sort of broader generative creativity (poesis). In this sense, the experimental ethnographic film by Lucien Castaing-Taylor & Véréna Paravel (2012), *Leviathan*, which takes place on, around, as well as under and above a deep-sea fishing vessel, is an example of anthropology as ontological poetics. Multiple cameras attached to bodies, thrust under water, or mounted on different parts of the ship disrupt any singular human perspective or narrative. The result is a disturbing dissolution of the self as we become enveloped in a monstrous marine world of piscine creatures, reeling boats, butchered bodies, and diving gulls. *Leviathan* presents no argument and certainly no metaphysics; rather, it dissolves many of the conceptual structures that hold us together so that we can be made over by the unexpected entities and forces that emerge from the depths (see Stevenson & Kohn 2015). The cultivation of representational craft as a way of becoming attuned to other kinds of realities, a hallmark of what I call ontological poetics, is also evident in the writing of McLean (2009), Raffles (2012), Stewart (2012), Stevenson (2014) and Pandian (2015).

There are, in addition, ontological approaches concerned with Being in a human sense (e.g., Jackson 1989) and its becoming under adverse conditions (Biehl & Locke 2010). Because such explorations of Being are largely limited to the human in terms of the human, they are not a focus of this article. Nonetheless, they can speak to distinctively human moral worlds in ways that can also be cognizant of the historically given sets of ontological assumptions that may frame them (Zigon 2014).

If we accept that ontology concerns the study of reality, ontological anthropology becomes a particular but capacious way of studying reality that takes into account two key elements of our field: one methodological, the other theoretical. The major methodological innovation of our field is ethnography by which I mean a practice of immersive engagement with the everyday messiness of human lives and the broader worlds in which humans live as well as the various more or less reflexive forms of voicing attention to that practice. By being ethnographic, and by developing conceptual resources out of this engagement, ontological anthropology, as I discuss below, makes a unique contribution to what could otherwise seem to be a topic best reserved for philosophy. The methodological focus also delimits the subject matter. Ontological anthropology is not generically about "the world," and it never fully leaves humans behind. It is about what we learn about the world and the human through the ways in which humans engage with the world. Attention to such engagements often undoes any bounded notion of what the human is. Ontological anthropology is for the most part posthumanist but that does not mean it sidesteps humans and human concerns altogether.

Anthropology's defining theoretical contribution is the culture concept, broadly construed, and ontological anthropology grapples critically and conceptually with its affordances and limitations

in sophisticated ways. The culture concept is an anthropological refinement of a broader linguistic, epistemological, representational, or correlational turn in philosophy. That turn, often associated with Immanuel Kant, shifts philosophical attention away from questions about the substance of the world to those conditions under which humans know or represent the world (Meillassoux 2008). In the social sciences and anthropology, beginning with the largely mutually independent efforts of Émile Durkheim and Franz Boas, this attention to epistemology is channeled in ways that explicitly or implicitly work with some of the ontological properties of linguistic representation. The hall-mark of modern anthropology, as prefigured by these two scholars, is the recognition of the reality of phenomena that we can term "socially constructed." Socially constructed phenomena are the product of contingent and conventional contexts, be they historical, social, cultural, or linguistic. The circular, reciprocal, coconstitutive nature of these constructions makes them language-like, regardless of whether the items related are explicitly treated as linguistic. The Boasian approach, however, is tied to language in a fairly explicit way (e.g., Boas 1889; see Stocking 1974, pp. 58–59). This is evident in Geertz's (1973a) symbolic anthropology as well as its critiques (Clifford & Marcus 1986), which draw attention to the constructed nature of anthropological representations and thus amplify the linguistic even as they incorporate more sophisticated analyses of power and history. Durkheim's [1938 (1895)] approach, although not linguistic in name, explores elements of social life that are essentially symbolic. His definition of a social fact bears all the formal properties of a symbolic representational system such as human language in which relata are produced by and contribute to the system through which they relate—a system that achieves a kind of closure, totality, and separation by virtue of this special kind of relationality. I designate as "cultural" any entity that is treated as exhibiting such properties, regardless of whether it is so termed.

In the contemporary French tradition, this linguistic turn is much more explicit, influenced by the semiology of Ferdinand de Saussure [1986 (1916)], especially as it was taken up by Claude Lévi-Strauss. The Saussurean tradition sees the sign, of which the human linguistic sign is considered the prime example, as both arbitrary and conventional: arbitrary in the sense that it has no direct connection to or motivation from its object of reference and conventional in the sense that its meaning or referential value is fixed by a set of codified relations it has to other such signs in the system of signs. One result of this take on language is a sharp division between the world of signs and the world to which those signs refer without an account of how these worlds may be connected. This is a problem for any anthropological approach that relies on Saussure for its theory of representation (Keane 2003). Lévi-Strauss saw the dualism that the Saussurean gap implies as the quintessential human problem, and it is evident also in the works of heirs to this structuralist tradition such as Michel Foucault. When Foucault (1970), for example, writes that "life itself" was unthinkable before the historical conditions that made such a concept possible, he is reflecting the human reality that this broader turn to language and social construction reveals at the same time that he is voicing the difficulty, given an analytical framework built on human language, to conceptualize that which is outside of language or culture.

My version of ontological anthropology, based on the ethnography of human relations to rain-forest beings in Ecuador's Upper Amazon, addresses the problem of language directly (Kohn 2013). I argue that the best way to reconfigure anthropology's relationship to language is through the ethnographic study of how humans communicate with a host of nonhuman beings in a world that is itself communicative but not symbolic or linguistic. This allows us to see language "from the outside," so to speak, by looking at its relationship to a broader series of forms of communication that are representational but not language-like, and whose unique properties emerge ethnographically at the same time as they reveal what makes language special. Helpful here is the semiotic framework of nineteenth-century philosopher and logician Charles Peirce (e.g., Peirce 1955), rather than that of Saussure, because it can situate human representational processes

vis-à-vis nonhuman ones (Hoffmeyer 1996, 2008; Hornborg 1996; Deacon 1997) in ways that allow for what Peirce calls the "outward clash" (cited in Keane 2003) with that which lies beyond human forms of representation. I am interested in understanding how these kinds of realities make us over once the grip of language is loosened. I argue that doing this is crucial for anthropology because it reveals how so many of our conceptual assumptions (e.g., about difference, context, relationality, and commensurability) are drawn from language and its properties, even in posthumanist approaches. As I argue, getting right this relationship of language to nonlanguage, especially via the route of the representational but not linguistic, as revealed in the complex communicative ecologies of tropical forests, will help us create the conceptual resources we will need as we learn to "ecologize."

The broad ontological turn in anthropology has an affinity with a related turn today in philosophy, which is also trying to free itself from the Kantian reorientation of philosophy as the study of human thought. This orientation has, according to Quentin Meillassoux (2008), kept philosophy from appreciating what he calls the "great outdoors"—the world beyond human representation (see also Bryant 2011, Bryant et al. 2011, Harman 2012). I do not think it is warranted to see the turn to language, which provides the foundations for anthropology, as "wrong." Quite the opposite, it gets at something fundamental about the reality of human life. In this sense, focusing on language is also ontological. Yet, by attending to a certain aspect of reality, it forecloses attention to others. So, in brief, I define ontological anthropology as the nonreductive ethnographic exploration of realities that are not necessarily socially constructed in ways that allow us to do conceptual work with them. I see this as a response to a conceptual, existential, ethical, and political problem—how to think about human life in a world in which a kind of life and future that is both beyond the human and constitutive of the human is now in jeopardy.

THE BROAD TURN TO ONTOLOGY

If culture is that which is socially constructed, then "nature" may be defined as that which is not. However, the idea of nature is certainly historically contingent and need not exist at a given time or in a given place. And yet, ontological anthropologists would hold that an exclusive focus on social construction is a problem, such that, if we can talk about nature, it is only as culture.

There are many anthropologists whose work refuses that solution in ways that orient their work toward ontology. Many of these precede the narrow turn to ontology. Bateson [2000 (1972), 2002 (1979)], in his insistence on looking at humans as parts of larger "ecologies of mind," and who saw a global environmental crisis as the consequence of our inability to grasp these broader relations, is one important ontological anthropologist.

Ontological concerns seem difficult to avoid in certain arenas of inquiry. As much as our anthropological responsibility is to demonstrate the historical construction of nature, landscapes, or forests (Balée 1989, Raffles 2002), there are also forces that move in an opposite direction, and conceptualizing these seems inescapable when dealing anthropologically with the environment or ecology (Helmreich 2009, Choy 2011). Similarly, despite the importance of focusing on the social life of things (Appadurai 1986), ethnographic attention to materiality problematizes the relationship between human (social) subjects and nonhuman objects (Miller 2005). Using the analytic of social construction to question the authority of medical and scientific knowledge and institutions is important, yet something about the body forces anthropologists onto ontological terrain when they turn their attention to medicine (Lock 1993, Mol 2002, Thompson 2007, Roberts 2013). Thus, although attention to embodied experience has largely been a humanistic concern (Jackson 1996), phenomenology provides one way to break down distinctions between humans and nonhumans by bypassing the messy problem of humanly exceptional forms of representation (Ingold

2000, 2007, 2011; see also Hallowell 1960). Finally, if religion can be treated as a cultural system (Geertz 1973b), taking spirits seriously further forces us onto ontological terrain (Chakrabarty 2000, Singh 2015).

Especially in the development of what has come to be known as actor–network theory (ANT), Latour (1988), along with others (Callon et al. 1986, Callon 1999), has been central in providing a way for anthropologists working with nonhumans, the environment, materiality, medicine, science, technology, and the body to bring nature into culture and culture into nature. Much of the broader turn to ontology within anthropology relies in some way on the ANT framework. ANT is sometimes considered methodologically as "symmetrical anthropology" (Latour 1993, p. 103) owing to its refusal to give explanatory priority to one actor or entity over another; its metaphysical correlate would be a "flat ontology" (Bryant 2011): The world is the product of many kinds of agencies, none of which is necessarily more important than any other. ANT seeks to overcome the mind/body dualism by assuming that everything has mind-like agential as well as matter-like properties. Such relationality, where relata do not precede their relating, has a Saussurean flavor and is treated as explicitly language-like in some approaches to science and technology studies (see Law & Mol 2008, p. 58).

Even if she would resist appeals to the gendered authoritative foundations that terms such as metaphysics and ontology can imply, Donna Haraway is one of the most important voices in the anthropological turn to ontology. As a trained biologist, she insists on the responsibility of getting the sciences "right," even as she interrogates science's claims to truth—questioning any sharp line between fact and "fabulation" (Haraway 1991a,c). Haraway is dedicated to living well with other kinds of beings, something that she draws from her daily life with her canine companions (Haraway 2003, 2008). She holds these commitments in generative tension with a sensitive attunement to politics and history. She has a complex and subtle engagement with the Marxian and feminist tradition that allows her to track power and desire and the gendered historical structures through which they are channeled. In short, though the turn to ontology may be criticized for being apolitical, reactionary, or too focused on exotic alters (Bessire & Bond 2014)—claims with some foundation that I critically evaluate in my discussion below of the narrow turn to ontology—the same cannot be leveled against Haraway.

Haraway's project is profoundly ontological. She insists on including other beings in our anthropological accounts with the hopes of imagining and enacting an ethics and politics that can make room for these other beings. Haraway's approach has been extended in "multi-species ethnography" (Kirksey & Helmreich 2010), which tackles the question of what kind of hope is possible in what Anna Tsing (2014) calls "blasted landscapes" (see Kirksey 2014; for explorations related to transgender, gender, and race, see Agard-Jones 2013, Hayward 2013, Weaver 2013).

THE NARROW ONTOLOGICAL TURN

In some ways a French turn, the narrow ontological turn associated with the recently translated books of Descola (2013), Viveiros de Castro (2014), and Latour (2013) is producing the most interest (and anxiety) in North American anthropology. It shares with much of anthropology certain assumptions about representation that come from Saussurean linguistics as adopted by Lévi-Strauss. These assumptions are evident even in the various critiques they pose to social construction.

Lévi-Strauss, however, is important in another way. He is, perhaps, the original ontological anthropologist: Lévi-Strauss insists that native thought is conceptual in its own right and in ways that undermine Western metaphysical concepts (Lévi-Strauss 1966), and even more radical, he insists that thought itself (which becomes visible in our anthropological attempts to think with

the thoughts of others) reveals ontological properties of the universe [Lévi-Strauss 1992 (1955), p. 56]. My reference to the recent work of Descola, Viveiros de Castro, and Latour as the narrow ontological turn is in no way to disparage it as limited. One goal of this article is to appreciate just how varied and sophisticated their projects are.

Descola's Beyond Nature and Culture

All three projects are grappling with the consequences of Descola's dissolution of the category of nature as the ground for anthropological inquiry and his recuperation of animism based on his work among the Amazonian Achuar. Animism is no longer treated as the mistaken belief in an animated nature (Tylor 1871) but as an extension of social relationality to nonhumans in ways that imply a set of ontological assumptions distinct from the one with which anthropology traditionally works (Descola 1994, 1996; see also Latour 1993; Bird-David 1999; Harvey 2005; Willerslev 2007, 2012; C. Scott 2013). This new understanding of animism leads each of the three authors to critique social construction as the sole way to account for difference. Their critiques are structuralist: Argumentation involves contrastive opposites (but see Viveiros de Castro 2014, p. 209), and difference and relationality enjoy metaphysical primacy.

Descola additionally shares with Lévi-Strauss an emphasis on broad ethnological comparison and the formalist insistence that the apparently infinitely diverse ways in which people live in relation to others are the product of more finite ways of apprehending and construing these relations. For Descola (2013), these constraints are cognitive and logical (cf. Lévy-Bruhl 1926). One understands others (whether human or nonhuman) by self-comparison. Accordingly, only certain formal possibilities exist, leading to sets of ontological assumptions that then become stabilized in certain historical contexts.

By comparison to oneself, an other can be understood to have similar interiorities and dissimilar exteriorities. This orients what Descola terms "animism," which as an ideal type is visible among many indigenous societies in the Amazon and in the boreal regions of North America. The animist holds that all beings are persons (animals and spirits have a kind of interiority or selfhood that is comparable with that of human persons), but these beings are differentiated by their exteriorities— the bodies that these various kinds inhabit. Given this understanding, a shaman can become a jaguar by wearing as clothing elements of a feline body, such as canine teeth and spotted hides, that make jaguars distinctive predatory beings. A psychic continuity permits movement across physical discontinuities.

The assumption that others have dissimilar interiorities but similar exteriorities orients what Descola calls "naturalism," which is typical of the modern West. Here, a unique interiority is privileged as the marker of difference. This is visible at a number of levels: the individual (where solipsism and the problem of other minds are philosophical problems), the group (where culture, not "race," is the important variable), and the species (among which only the human one enjoys genuine interiority). Only with naturalism is "nature" as an object external to our subjective selves conceivable.

By contrast, the assumption that others have similar interiorities and similar exteriorities orients what Descola calls "totemism," which is best exemplified by certain Australian aboriginal societies where others share both an interiority and an exteriority within specific human/nonhuman hybrid collectives. Here, the distinctions between interiority and exteriority break down. What instead becomes important is the continual investment by humans and nonhumans in maintaining and capacitating a shared world (see Povinelli 2015).

Finally, the attribution of dissimilar interiorities and dissimilar exteriorities orients what Descola calls "analogism," which, historically, is widely distributed throughout Asia, Africa, Europe,

and the Americas. Faced with the prospect of radical incommensurability, the analogist creates logical groupings among entities she otherwise suspects have no relation to each other. Matrices of cardinal directions, maps, chains of being, and microcosms are all attempts by analogists to control the perceived chaos of the world by imposing order onto to it.

Descola's approach has been criticized as merely taxonomic, thus just a version either of his analogism (Viveiros de Castro 2014, p. 83) or of his naturalism (Fischer 2014, p. 334). His approach has also been cast as an elaborate misrecognition of the human propensity to attribute culture to all entities, which would make the West unique only in its denial of this fact—a critique that seems to vindicate anthropology's celebration of the culture concept as its enduring analytic (Sahlins 2014). However, Descola's work provides one way to think about variations in ontological assumptions without explaining these in cultural terms: If these variations were cultural, there would be many more than four variants. Descola's approach also enables an account of how such assumptions can realize possible worlds by selectively actualizing certain properties inherent to the world beyond human cognition (Kohn 2009; Descola 2010, 2014). It can also help us understand how the specific differences each set of assumptions has relative to the others can affect the interactional dynamics among any of them.

Viveiros de Castro's Cannibal Metaphysics

Viveiros de Castro's (2014) metaphysics grows from his masterful comparative synthesis of the vast Amazonian ethnological literature that permits him to identify the "perspectival" quality of much Amerindian thought (1998). Many Amazonians subscribe to some version of the following perspectival logic: Under normal circumstances, humans see humans as humans, animals as animals, and spirits (if they see them) as spirits. But predatory beings such as jaguars and spirits will see humans as prey, and prey animals (such as wild pigs) will see humans as predators. Furthermore, all beings, whether human, animal, or spirit, will see themselves as persons. From an "I" perspective, then, a jaguar will see himself as a human person. He will experience himself as drinking manioc beer, living in a thatch house, etc., but he will be seen by other kinds of beings, such as humans (under normal circumstances) and prey animals, from an external "It" perspective, namely as a predatory being. Thus, from their own perspectives, all beings see things in the same way—similar to humans, jaguars see themselves drinking manioc beer—but, crucially, what they see in this same way is a different world. And yet the knowledge of being in a different world can only be achieved comparatively by grasping how those on the outside see us: When one is drinking manioc beer, one never knows if that beer is "just" beer or if it is the blood of one's enemies. This sort of knowledge is available only by comparison to an external perspective.

Viveiros de Castro's reflections on perspectivism lead him to conclude that we are dealing with a metaphysics that is fundamentally different from that which informs Western academic thought, including anthropology. Taking his approach seriously by doing conceptual work with its attendant implications distorts the anthropological project and posits a radical critique of the social construction at its heart. Viveiros de Castro's approach allows him to see more clearly the ways in which anthropology is founded on a nature/culture divide that posits nature as a sort of universal, unitary, and existent ground and culture as the infinitely variable form of representing nature.

This nature/culture binary has traditionally allowed anthropological comparison. We stabilize or bracket out nature to compare cultural (or historical or social) differences. Viveiros de Castro calls this Western metaphysical framework "multiculturalist" (many cultures but one nature). This logic persists in "postmodern" frameworks that retain the sociohistorical contingency, even as they erase the natural ground.

The Amerindian style of thought, by contrast, allows Viveiros de Castro to posit an alternative metaphysics that he terms "multinaturalist." Seen as multinaturalist, the Amerindian style of thinking posits many natures, each comprising a set of affects particular to a given kind of body, but only one culture. An anthropology based on a multicultural metaphysical distinction between nature and culture does not work in a region where nature and culture take on very different properties. For example, making the multiculturalist statement "Amazonians believe that animals are persons," where belief marks the epistemological or representational status of the claim, not only ignores the metaphysical assumptions upon which Amazonians relate to other kinds of beings as persons, but also, and worse yet, forces these people to conform to another set of metaphysical assumptions, one in which such ideas are merely beliefs or socially constructed representations.

Perspectivism has tremendous ethnological traction. It clarifies and unites a series of ethnographic observations on, for example, ethnonyms, kinship, predation, shamanism, clothing and bodily adornment, and relations to nonhumans. As a form of relating in which the other is integral to the self, whites have figured prominently (Kohn 2002, 2013; Viveiros de Castro 2004; Vilaça 2010). But *Cannibal Metaphysics* is not just a metaphysics of so-called "cannibals." Instead, it provides a metaphysics of predation in the broadest of terms; it can ingest our own metaphysical assumptions by, for example, revealing the ways in which we privilege the thing-in-itself even as we focus on the variable and partial modes through which it is apprehended. For multinaturalism, there are no self-identical entities such as, to return to a previous example, beer or blood: Beer could always be a kind of blood, and blood could be beer-like for somebody (Viveiros de Castro 2014, p. 73). Multinaturalism, then, takes the comparison inherent to perspectivism—for a characteristic of perspectival thinking is that one perspective can hold together multiple irreducible worlds—and asks what it would be like if we saw everything as potentially generatively comparative.

Appreciating things multinaturally allows us to see my definition of ontology as the study of "reality" as already multiculturally determined. If nature is our ground, it is natural for us to think of ontology as a search for what really exists. But in a multinatural metaphysics, there is no stable ontological ground. The shaman walking through the forest does not ask whether spirits exist (that would be the multicultural question); he wants to know only how to actualize a relation with them. By extending this logic beyond Amazonia, Viveiros de Castro makes anthropology a practice of cosmic philosophical predation that may allow us to actualize a multinaturalism immanent in the bowels of multiculturalism (Viveiros de Castro 2014, p. 93). It thus becomes a way to arrive at genuinely "alter" concepts (see also Hage 2012), derived "otherwise" to (although not necessarily outside) our metaphysics (Povinelli 2012).

Critics of Viveiros de Castro have emphasized the excessive generalization of his high structuralist framework: Not all Amazonians, let alone "Amerindians," are perspectivists (Turner 2009, Ramos 2012). Critics have also argued that the politics of multinaturalism is too broad and generically oriented toward global issues (such as the Anthropocene) (see Danowski & Viveiros de Castro 2014) to capture the everyday political struggles of Amazonian peoples (Ramos 2012, Bessire & Bond 2014). In addition, they argue, speaking for Amerindian ontologies from the outside is politically suspect (Salmond 2014, Todd 2014; but for an elaborate Amazonian alter-metaphysics, quite resonant with multinaturalism, authored by a Yanomami shaman and political activist, see Kopenawa & Albert 2013).

What to make of the potential theoretical and political relevance of a style of thought that (*a*) may not be characteristic of all "Amerindians" and (*b*) may have little relevance to the "political situations regarding the predicament of indigenous peoples in adverse interethnic contexts" (Ramos 2012, p. 483)? The Amazon is becoming increasingly deforested and incorporated into national and global political economies. Anthropology should not lose sight of this complex reality.

In such a context, what bearing could Amazonian perspectival ideas, drawn from seemingly time-less cosmologies (now fragmented) and sylvan ways of life (now receding in the face of more potent economic forces), have to do with the everyday lives of people in the Amazon (Bessire & Bond 2014)?

Viveiros de Castro's project should not, however, be casually dismissed. One cannot say that what we need is more attention to "indigenous epistemologies" on par with academic ones on a level "cross-cultural" playing field (Ramos 2012, p. 486) because this would domesticate Amazo-nian thought by framing it in terms of a Western metaphysics in which concepts are cultural or epistemological. Critiques of Viveiros de Castro's project should critically engage his critique of culture and epistemology.

Perspectivism resonates with and illuminates my own ethnographic material drawn from every-day life among the Quichua-speaking Runa of Ecuador's Upper Amazon. Is this not one successful test of anthropological abstraction? But Viveiros de Castro is aiming for something even more general involving concepts (Viveiros de Castro 2014, p. 192). Of crucial importance is the recog-nition that concepts can have a certain kind of referential freedom and that concept work is not the exclusive domain of philosophers (Skafish 2014a). Amazonian peoples, like all peoples, have concepts, and Viveiros de Castro's project involves further developing concepts, such as multinat-uralism, out of a set of perspectival Amazonian concepts. To be critical of this kind of concept work as too abstracted from local political concerns would demand a similar critique of, say, Strathern's (1988) feminist anthropological classic, *The Gender of the Gift*, which also derives anthropological concepts from Melanesian concepts to think with and against certain Western forms of thinking involving nature, gender, the person, scale, and relationality.

Crucial to these concerns about concepts—are they too general, ethnographically valid, polit-ically relevant?—is the question of alterity. Viveiros de Castro's goal is to capacitate and extend a fragile style of perspectival thought alter to Western metaphysics. Although such forms of alter-thinking need not lie outside the West or modernity (see Pandolfo 2007, 2008; Pedersen 2011; Skafish 2011), the narrow turn holds that there is a Western metaphysics against which these can be juxtaposed (Skafish 2014b). Furthermore, much anthropological theory is framed by such a Western metaphysics, even though anthropology's method of inquiry places our field in a posi-tion to deform such metaphysics by being itself deformed by the different forms of thought it encounters.

Anthropology surely has a nostalgic relation to the kinds of alterity that certain historical forces (which have also played a role in creating our field) have destroyed. To recognize this is one thing. It is quite another to say that for this reason there is no longer any conceptual space "alter" to the logic of this kind of domination. For this would be the final act of colonization, one that would subject the possibility of something else, located in other lived worlds, human and otherwise, to a far more permanent death (Kohn 2014). Although it is valid to examine what emerges once such a metaphysics is dead (Bessire 2014), doing so is not Viveiros de Castro's political project.

One can ask whether it is appropriate to make multinaturalism the sole metaphysics alter to the Western one, and Descola's *Beyond Nature and Culture* is an attempt to show that other metaphysics are possible. One can also ask why the multiplicities that multinaturalism recognizes fit so conveniently with Deleuzian thought (Vigh & Sausdal 2014, p. 57), to which Viveiros de Castro counters that Deleuze & Guattari (2014) developed much of their thinking from anthropological "alter" concepts. Finally, one could ask whether the focus on radical alterity misses what we share (Vigh & Sausdal 2014, p. 57).

These are valid concerns and ones that are at times mine as well. But they misunderstand the project. Multinaturalism is not a description of how the world is, or how one kind of person thinks, but a call for a form of thinking, available to anyone, that is able to see possible ways of becoming

otherwise. Multinaturalism is not a way of commensurating difference but of communicating "by differences" (Viveiros de Castro 2004, p. 10), recognizing that there is a form of relating that allows differences to be held together rather than to be subsumed. It certainly grows out of certain styles of thinking that ethnography reveals, but it also grows out of the recursive nature of comparative ethnographic thinking whereby one's form of thinking is constantly being changed by one's object of thought (Holbraad 2012, 2013; see also Jensen & Rödje 2010, p. 3).

Latour's Modes of Existence

Latour's (2013) *Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* and some of his other writings on the Anthropocene (Latour 2014b) are the most forceful articulations of the stakes for the ontological turn. The ecological crisis is the ethical and political problem of our times, one that changes the nature of ethics and politics. The Anthropocene puts anthropos at center stage—humans are a force of nature—at the same time that it changes what it means to be human and makes clear that anthropology, now too at center stage, can no longer be only about humans (Latour 2014a,b). Latour recognizes that although ANT is an important step toward getting humans and nonhumans to be part of the same analytical framework, its very symmetrical nature excludes value, which is, of course, central to any political project. One has to say why "we" should care about ecological problems, but this needs to be done in such a way that allows those other "voices" that compose this common "we" to articulate their values as well.

Both a metaphysical and an ontological account that makes room for other modes of existence, the *Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* also offers a way to think about how to live with the kinds of beings such modes institute. Similar to many of the accounts discussed above, its metaphysics responds to the suspicion that too much description may be limiting. Latour's goal is to recognize and give dignity to multiple modes of existence, or ontologies, and to how the beings such modes institute may find a way to dwell together in a common *oikos*. He does so by tracing out the lightest of metaphysics, whose descriptions will capacitate, rather than hinder, the various modes of existence it thus recognizes. For Latour, a mode of existence has its own way of being (its own kind of "trajectory"), its own way of nonbeing (its own kind of "hiatus"), and its own, sometimes fragile, conditions under which it can be [its own truth or "felicity conditions," which he adapts from Austin (1962) but with the hope of extending it beyond its humanistic linguistic usage]. Stones, spirits, poetry, and scientific objects can all be described as having unique and valid modes of existence. If we can allow adherents of any mode to see themselves for who they really are and for what they stand, via a process that will involve negotiation with those beings or those who speak for them, then anthropology can become a project of cosmic "diplomacy" (a term Latour adapts from Stengers 2005, 2011). That is, anthropology becomes a privileged vehicle for a special kind of translation that would not involve recourse to any one ontological foundation (e.g., comparing two cultures by virtue of the equivalent but different ways each represents nature), nor could it be undertaken with scientific detachment: The anthropologist as diplomat is invested in successfully moving among worlds, as she recognizes that our shared survival is at stake in making room for these various modes of existence and what they may have to contribute.

Latour's project is, as his book's subtitle indicates, an "anthropology of the moderns." This is an anthropology of Western institutions—science, law, and religion are important ones—that have their own metaphysics and their own ways of instituting beings. By diplomatically redescribing these institutions, the adherents of each will be able to appreciate themselves and others in terms of both their differences and their common concerns; as they learn to face each other, they will learn to face the crisis they share in common. "Moderns" here refers not necessarily to a group, say, ethnic Europeans, but to those who somehow subscribe to modernization. And modernizing

is the problem for Latour. It is the way in which humans—whether in the guise of capitalism, human exceptionalism, or progress—have become a force that threatens to destroy the plurality of modes of being. His diplomatic effort is part of a critical project that would see "ecologizing" among the pluralities of beings as the antidote to modernizing. As such, Latour's project is not just a book, but also an interactive website and a series of workshops designed for negotiation with "co-investigators," who are invited to engage with his descriptions of themselves and those they represent (**http://www.modesofexistence.org/**).

In one of the most insightful critical syntheses of the project, philosopher Patrice Maniglier asks, On whose behalf is Latour a diplomat? [For an excellent discussion of the project in relation to Descola, see also Salmon & Charbonnier (2014).] Can one be both the metaphysician of diplomacy and its diplomat? Latour, I think, would respond that he is proposing an experimental method. Whether it eventually proves useful in real diplomatic situations would be the proof of its success. Another concern is whether this project remains too symmetrical—providing a liberal forum in which all modes may be able to cohabitate (see Fortun 2014, p. 315). Here, I think it could be productive to extend Latour's project in light of Haraway's injunction to take "response-ability" for decisions involving the life as well as the death of beings, kinds, and perhaps even modes of existence (Haraway 2008).

CONCLUSION

In sum, the major concerns voiced by the anthropological community with respect to the narrow ontological turn are that it is (*a*) excessively structuralist, (*b*) overly concerned with alterity, and (*c*) not sufficiently political. Regarding the first concern, my response is that the narrow turn is honestly structuralist, as opposed to so much of the rest of our field whose implicit theory of representation, whether avowed or not, is Saussurean and therefore cryptically structuralist. Regarding the second concern, although Descola, Viveiros de Castro, and Latour all rely in some way on an ethnologically abstracted and historically extracted Other, the question they are asking is nevertheless radical and important, namely, Is there a way to recognize and capacitate difference that doesn't make it fit "exactly inside the same eternal and universal [i.e., Western] patterns of 'social life'" (Latour 2014b)? That is, explaining difference in terms of culture, or in terms of political economy, makes it, in Povinelli's (2001) terms, "doable" and, in that sense, makes anthropology, even as a critical practice, an extension of what she would call a late liberal logic (Povinelli 2002).

Perhaps the greatest concern, however, is the final one, that the general turn to ontology is somehow an apolitical or, worse, reactionary project, where the easy politics of a big abstract political problem (we can all care about global warming, a problem that is both everywhere and nowhere) hides all the local problems in which political economy cannot be ignored (Bessire & Bond 2014). Must all politics be local politics, and if so, is ontological anthropology antithetical to this? I think the answer to these questions is no. There are important ontological projects that are precisely about politics in local as well as global contexts (see Blaser 2009, de la Cadena 2010, Pedersen 2011, Tsing 2014, Povinelli 2015).

I take the broader turn to ontological anthropology as a theoretically and politically important addition to our discipline—one that should seek not to replace, but to augment traditional anthropological critiques based on attention to social construction, political economy, and the human. Although anthropology as a discipline needs to make conceptual room for ontology, not all anthropology should necessarily be ontological.

My ideal version of an ontological anthropology would be (*a*) metaphysical, interested in exploring and developing concepts; (*b*) ontological, attentive to the kinds of realities such concepts

can amplify; (*c*) poetic, attuned to the unexpected ways we can be made over by those not necessarily human realities; (*d*) humanistic, concerned with how such realities make their ways into historically contingent human moral worlds; and (*e*) political, concerned with how this kind of inquiry can contribute to an ethical practice that can include and be transformed by the other kinds of beings with whom we share our lives and futures. Such an ideal is perhaps best realized, not by any one scholar, but by a diverse and growing community of ontologically attuned ethnographic thinkers.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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